THE WOMAN JESUS LOVED

MARY MAGDALENE IN THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY AND RELATED DOCUMENTS

BY

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1. Survey of Research

Although Mary Magdalene is not one of the most studied biblical personages, she has still been an object of inquiry from the very beginning of the study of early Christian texts. Three major areas of interest have dominated the exegetical and theological discussion about her: Mary Magdalene and the four anointers of the New Testament gospels, Mary Magdalene in Gnostic writings, and Mary Magdalene from women’s studies perspectives. While the New Testament episodes have been in the foreground from the pre-critical era into the period of modern exegesis, i.e., from the third century until our own, the last hundred years have witnessed increased scholarly attention given to Gnostic writings, with women’s studies gaining momentum within the last two decades. The present study of Mary Magdalene focuses on these more recent areas of interest. Nevertheless, the New Testament connections are briefly introduced in order to give perspective to the presentation.

1.1 Mary Magdalene and the Four Anointers

When the early church fathers began to study Mary Magdalene pericopes of the New Testament, the most burning issue for them was to decide what the relationship of Mary Magdalene was to the four anointment accounts of the New Testament (Mark 14,3-9; Matt 26,6-13; Luke 7,36-50; John 12,1-8). There is no need here to go into details of this discussion. Suffice it to say that since the sixth century the most common, but from a modern exegetical perspective, untenable view in this matter was that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany (John 12,1-8), and the anonymous anointers in Mark 14,3-9 (Matt 26,6-13) and Luke 7,36-50 were one and the

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1 For a detailed survey of patristic interpretations, see Holzmeister 1922, 402-422.556-584.
same person. The notion had its starting-point in an assumption that Mary Magdalene who is mentioned in Luke 8.2 is identical with the woman in Luke 7.36-50. A further harmonizing corollary of this identification was that Mary Magdalene and all the other anointers were merged as well. In the late Middle Ages this interpretation gained such a dominant position in the Western Church that those who disagreed with it risked being condemned by the church. In the Greek Orthodox Church the situation was different. All three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the anointer of Luke 7.36-50, were seen as distinct persons, and Mary Magdalene was not linked with the incident of anointment at all.

It was not until historical-critical exegesis began that there developed a greater variance in the Western tradition of interpretation. Most of the Protestant exegetes adopted the “Eastern” line of interpretation, whereas Roman Catholic scholars continued to abide by the traditional conception. Only in our century have Catholic interpreters begun to question more widely the identification of Mary Magdalene with any of the anointers. The long history of interpretation during which Mary Magdalene has primarily been seen in light of the anointers, especially of the prostitute in Luke 7, has nevertheless left its traces on the picture drawn of her even in modern times. Even if scholars nowadays very seldom see Mary Magdalene in Luke 7, in more popular — both religious and secular — interpretations of the New Testament texts she is frequently considered to be a penitent woman with a notorious past. Sometimes this notion has also crept into the mind of a modern New Testament scholar. Typical of the portrait composed throughout the centuries of Mary Magdalene from the New Testament gospels is that her assumed role as a loose, but contrite woman has overshadowed the part she played in the Easter narratives. In later legends and sermons she is much better known as Luke’s penitent sinner than as “apostle to the apostles.” It was actually women’s studies perspectives which brought the Easter texts into a focus in the discussion about the canonical Mary Magdalene.

1.2 Mary Magdalene, New Coptic Manuscripts, and Women’s Studies Perspectives

A new viewpoint to the personage of Mary Magdalene was opened by the discoveries of the two new Coptic manuscripts in the course of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. In them, for the first time, the ancient writings Pistis Sophia, the Gospel of Mary, and the Sophia of Jesus Christ were brought to light. All three works were revelation dialogues which showed their readers how some second and third century Christians viewed the risen Lord, his disciples, and his female followers, including Mary Magdalene. Earlier the conception of an extra-canonical Mary Magdalene within Christian tradition was based on three rather brief references of the heresiologists to her connections with some

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2 The untenableness of this interpretation was already shown by Sickenberger (1952, 63-74) and Burkitt (1939-40, 157-159). Recent attempts, such as Feuillet (1975, 357-394, to revive this traditional view have not brought out anything substantially new to the treatment of this question.


4 Haskins 1993, 26, 406 n. 55.

5 Modern Catholic exegesis of Luke 7.36-50 is well represented by the comment of Fitzmyer (1981, 688): “In Western Church traditions, at least since the time of Gregory the Great, Mary of Bethany has been conflated with the sinner of Calilee, even with Mary Magdalene, ‘out of whom seven demons had come’ (8.2). There is, however, no basis for this conflation in the NT itself, and no evidence whatsoever that the ‘possession’ of Mary Magdalene was the result of personal sinfulness.”

6 Classic examples of this are Kazantzakis’ book The Last Temptation of Christ and Scorsese’s film based on it as well as Webber’s and Rice’s rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar, but see also Grassi & Grassi (1986, 58-67) who claim to make their popular presentation of Mary Magdalene “in accord with the information modern biblical study has given” (1986, vi).

7 Kümmer (1975, 213) refers to Ethelbert Stauffer who in his popular book Jesus war ganz anders (1957) insists that Mary Magdalene was a charming lady whom Jesus had received into his company in order to protect her from sinking deep again into her earlier wartht behavior.


9 The term is used of Mary Magdalene who brings the message of resurrection to the twelve. It was most likely coined by Hippolytus (see Bauer 1917 [1909], 265; Haskins 1993, 65); for its use in later sermons and religious illustrations, see Haskins 1993, 220-222; Schössler Fiorenza 1979, 208.

10 Haskins 1993, 392.
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Gnostic groups and on medieval legends. The new texts revealed the existence of another Mary Magdalene tradition.

Among the first to discover a new Mary Magdalene was Carl Schmidt who in his studies of Pistis Sophia and the Gospel of Mary paid attention to Mary Magdalene who assumes a leading role among the disciples as a receiver, an interpreter and a transmitter of the teachings of the Risen Jesus. Schmidt also noticed that in both of these writings a conspicuous tension prevails between Mary Magdalene and the male disciples of Jesus. Peter in particular experiences her as a rival who threatens his and the other disciples' authority. Following Harnack, Schmidt suggested that the tension possibly reflects a discussion about the role of women in Christian communities. Other scholars who studied these same writings made similar observations but on the whole this perspective did not attract great attention. Still, the main interest in Mary Magdalene continued to concentrate on the canonical texts and on the old question of the relationship of Mary Magdalene to the four anointers of the New Testament.

In the 1970s the situation changed decisively. That was caused by two factors. First, the publication of the Nag Hammadi Library, begun in the late 50s and completed in the form of a facsimile edition during the 70s, offered four new sources in which Mary Magdalene is depicted in a way different from that of the canonical gospels but somewhat similar to that of the Gospel of Mary and Pistis Sophia. The Gospel of Thomas, the Dialogue of the Savior, the First Apocalypse of James, and the Gospel of Philip all give Mary Magdalene a significant role. Second, not only was the number of sources multiplied, but also a new and third perspective to Mary Magdalene texts was introduced. During the last two decades religious texts dealing with women have been studied more than ever before under the presupposition that they provide information about attitudes towards women prevailing in the religious circles where the texts originated and were read, even the socio-historical circumstances under which the female audience of the texts lived.

A representative example of the new women's studies perspectives is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's book in Memory of Her. Although published not more than twelve years ago, it has already become a classic by showing how a feminist perspective can be utilized to enrich the historical-critical study of Christian origins. Schüssler Fiorenza's starting-point is the thesis that early Christian women have had a more important role in shaping the history of early Christianity than the first impression of the extant sources enables us to see. Most sources available to us are so patriarchal and androcentric that the actual contributions of women have been

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11 According to Origen, Celsus knew of a tradition which considered Mary Magdalene (Μαγδαληνή) as an originator of a Gnostic group (Contra Cel. 5.62); Hippolytus connects Mary Magdalene (Μαγδαληνή) with the Naassenes, who claim to derive their teachings from James through her (Ref. 5.7.1; 10.9.3); Epiphanius refers to the Great Questions of Mary (Pan. 26.8.2-3), which he attributes to the Gnostics or to the Borborites, according to which the Risen (?) Jesus once took Mary Magdalene aside on the mountain and revealed her a special secret (for the analysis of the text, see the chapter below “Mary Magdalene in the Great Questions of Mary”).

12 For medieval legendary material, see Malvern 1975, 71-99; Haskins 1993, 98-228.

13 Schmidt 1892, 452-455.

14 Schmidt 1896, 839-846.

15 E.g. Harnack 1891, 16-17; Zecharia Sitchin 1902, 160-161; Bauer 1967 [1909], 438.448-449. With regard to Mary Magdalene, Bauer’s inferences are indeed somewhat confused: on the one hand, he regards the Mary of the Gospel of Mary as the mother of Jesus (1967 [1909], 448); on the other hand, she is seen as Mary Magdalene who has received a special revelation from the Savior (1967 [1909], 438).

16 See e.g. Holmleister 1923, 402-422.556-584; Sickenberger 1925, 63-74; Burkitt 1930-31, 157-159.

17 The Nag Hammadi Library was discovered in Upper Egypt near the modern Nag Hammadi in 1945. It consists of 13 codices which contain more than 50 tractates. Most of the tractates are Gnostic, some non-Gnostic but obviously capable of being submitted to a Gnosticizing interpretation. For a concise general introduction to the library and the contents of its writings, see J.M. Robinson 1988.

18 Earlier in 1936, the discovery of a Manichaean library originating in Medinet Madi in Egypt (see Schmidt & Polotsky 1933, 6-10) already increased the number of the extra-canonical texts where Mary Magdalene appeared. For Mary Magdalene in Manichaean texts, see the Psalms of Hecaleides in the Manichaean Psalm-book (Allberry 1938, 187.192.194).

19 Schüssler Fiorenza 1983. The book contains several themes and aspects which Schüssler Fiorenza has dealt with in earlier articles; for references, see her, pp. XXV n. 15; 36 n. 2; 66 n. 24.

20 Other good examples of the new perspective are Schüssler Fiorenza 1980, 60-96; Schottroff 1980, 91-133; see also the studies in Moxnes 1989, 1-163.
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The task of feminist inquiry is to exercise a hermeneutics of suspicion, i.e., to go beyond the patriarchal control of the texts and to find the evidence which either directly or obliquely provides affirmation of women.

Thus the marginalization of women is not to be understood as an authentic presentation of historical reality but it is rather an ideological construction reflecting early Christian patriarchalism which defeated more "egalitarian" tendencies. With this understanding in mind, Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that the few early Christian texts which show that the early Christian movement was inclusive of women's active and equal participation in its life, even in leadership, do not speak about rare exceptions to the rule but rather hint at a much wider female activity. Based on these observations, she delineates a new reconstruction of Christian origins where a special emphasis is laid on women's contributions, on the one hand, and on their suppression by patriarchal views and structures, on the other. Although Schüssler Fiorenza herself does not focus very much on Mary Magdalene, the methodological framework she develops has greatly influenced further studies examining both the canonical and the extra-canonical — especially those which are traditionally styled Gnostic — Mary Magdalene texts.

The study of Mary Magdalene which claims to be the first to take full account of both Pistis Sophia and the Gospel of Mary as well as the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library is that of Marjorie Malvern. In reality, the work, which deals with the transmission and transformation of the Magdalene myth from the New Testa-

21 With regard to the topic of the present study, it is important to notice that Schüssler Fiorenza warns scholars about generalizing conclusions according to which patriarchal and androcentric attitudes can be found in certain kinds of texts ("orthodox") while others ("Gnostic") are free from them. She emphasizes (1983, 56; 56 n. 37) that all of the early Christian texts are basically products of a patriarchal culture and therefore all of them "must be tested as to how much they preserve and transmit the apostolic inclusivity and equality of early Christian beginnings and revelation."

22 Malvern states in her preface (1975, XI): "I also examine, as does no scholar to date, the prominent place given the fictionalized Mary Magdalene in second-century Gnostic writings." In light of this statement, it is no wonder that she does not list Schmidt's works in her bibliography.

23 Malvern 1975, 30-56.
24 Malvern (1975, 30) derives the notion of Mary Magdalene as being Jesus's companion from the Gospel of Philip and utilizes it as an interpretative key to the Gospel of Mary but does not clarify what it means in the context of the Gospel of Philip itself. The Gospel of Thomas (especially logion 14) is mentioned by Malvern only to illustrate the ambivalence toward women expressed in Early Christian texts (37-38).
25 Malvern 1975, 40.
26 Malvern (1975, 40) actually thinks her source is an apocryphon called "The True Prophet." No such writing exists. The text she refers to is a section of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies. Its name owes its origin to the translator of the text in Schneemelcher 1989, 479 (for the English translation, see Schneemelcher & Wilson 1992, 531).
strange, because in the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* the prophetess is a negative, earthly counterpart for the male and heavenly true prophet.

In *Pistis Sophia*, according to Malvern, Mary Magdalene absorbs the feminine attributes of the (Pistis) Sophia, goddess of wisdom, and is thus presented as the female divine counterpart of Christ.\(^{27}\) Again, Malvern’s claim remains unfounded. Regardless of what one thinks of Malvern’s characterization of Pistis Sophia as a goddess of wisdom, which in itself is a problem,\(^{28}\) it is clear that there is nothing in the writing which justifies the kind of identification which Malvern sees between Pistis Sophia and Mary Magdalene.

The next to draw scholarly attention to the Gnostic Mary Magdalene was Elaine Pagels. Although her treatment of Mary Magdalene consists of only a few pages in her popular but seminal book, *The Gnostic Gospels*,\(^{29}\) it has had a great impact on later studies on this topic. Pagels’ thesis is simple but challenging: the Gnostic texts which give Mary Magdalene a dominant role among the followers of Jesus and display the competition between her and the male disciples, especially Peter, are used as a weapon of polemics. In her view, these Gnostic writings “use the figure of Mary Magdalene to suggest that women’s activity challenged the leaders of the orthodox community, who regarded Peter as their spokesman.”\(^{30}\) They serve to speak on behalf of those Gnostic women who despite the “orthodox”\(^{31}\) opposition sought to gain positions of authority in Christian communities.\(^{32}\)

According to Pagels, this aspiration is found especially in the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and *Pistis Sophia*.

For Pagels, the emerging egalitarian pattern reflected in these writings is not relativized by the fact that in certain Gnostic Mary Magdalene texts the feminine is undeniably spoken of with contempt (*Dialogue of the Savior*) or the masculine is used to symbolize what is divine and the feminine what is merely human (*Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Mary*). In the case of the former, the target is not woman, but the power of sexuality, in the case of the latter, the authors of the texts simply employ language patterns familiar in their environment. Although not showing enough regard to the complexity of the way the sources picture Mary Magdalene, Pagels’ thesis opened a new perspective worth exploring into the figure of Mary Magdalene in the second and third century Gnostic texts.

All the extant extra-canonical and non-patristic writings containing Mary Magdalene traditions — with the exception of the *First Apocalypse of James* — are for the first time introduced by François Bovon in an article written in 1984. In his survey of those texts which he calls Gnostic, Bovon includes the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Pistis Sophia, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Great Questions of Mary*, the *Manichaean Psalm-book*. In addition, he presents the *Acts of Philip*, which in itself is not a Gnostic writing, but which, in his view, serves as an indication of the survival of Gnostic Mary Magdalene traditions.\(^{33}\) Besides surveying all of the early Christian, non-patristic Mary Magdalene passages, Bovon also introduces some general hypotheses which seek to explain the origin and popularity of Mary Magdalene traditions among what

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\(^{27}\) Malvern 1975, 55.

\(^{28}\) Malvern’s interpretation of Pistis Sophia is a result of assimilating freely features of various female figures who do not seem to have any direct connection to each other, such as Helen, the Sophia of the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the Mother Goddess of the Eleusinian mysteries and the Sophia of Jewish Wisdom.

\(^{29}\) Pagels 1981, 76-81.

\(^{30}\) Pagels 1981, 77.

\(^{31}\) Being aware of the problematic nature of this term, I have decided to use it for want of anything better. For the sake of variety, the terms “ecclesiastical” and “mainstream” Christianity are employed too. The terms refer to those second and third century Christians whose doctrinal and pragmatic decisions lead to the formation of the Catholic Church of the Constantinian era. Obviously, the border-line between orthodox and non-orthodox, even between orthodox and Gnostic Christians vacillates.

\(^{32}\) A similar idea was put forward already by Zscharnack (1902, 161; Zscharnack, to be sure, states somewhat ambiguously that Peter in Pistis Sophia represents on the one hand the ecclesiastical Chrisrians’ view of women, on the other hand he is one of the twelve Gnostic disciples) and later by Wilson (1968, 102-103) but only Pagels’ popular book brought this thesis to the awareness of a wider audience. Cf. also Krause 1981, 57.

he calls heterodox marginal Christian groups in the second and third centuries.  

First, those Mary Magdalene passages which emphasize her status as a companion of Jesus seem to reflect, according to Bovon, the influence of pagan mythological accounts which speak of divine dyads. Jesus and Mary Magdalene are thus a Christian adaptation of the mythical dyads in the same way as Simon Magus and Helen. Second, novels from late antiquity have also had an impact on Mary Magdalene traditions. Like the apocryphal acts, those Mary Magdalene passages which present her as Jesus’ companion reveal romantic traits most easily traceable to the loves stories of the Hellenistic period. Third, the importance of Mary Magdalene in the writings of second century Christian groups serve to legitimate the claims of women to have active roles in these communities. Correspondingly, the jealousy which the male apostles in many writings show towards Mary Magdalene because of her privileged role express the resistance of men to women’s aspirations either in these particular communities or among ecclesiastical Christians.

According to Bovon, all these hypotheses help us understand the development and the use of Mary Magdalene traditions in the second and third centuries. Yet he thinks that they do not adequately explain the great interest which the authors of so many second and third century writings took in her. The ultimate reason for choosing Mary Magdalene to be the companion of Jesus and the ideal believer in many second and third century writings is, for Bovon, her historical role as a witness to an appearance of the Risen Jesus, clearly reflected in the Gospel of John but omitted by other early Christian traditions such as 1 Cor 15,5-8. Without this experience she could hardly have enjoyed such popularity as a spiritual authority.

Since Pagels’ book supplied an interesting thesis for the use of Mary Magdalene passages and Bovon’s article contained a good inventory of almost all the extent extra-canonical, non-patristic Mary Magdalene passages and some tentative reflections on their 

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54 Bovon 1984, 56-57.
55 As Bovon (1984, 56) himself acknowledges, this hypothesis owes its origin to Harnack (1891, 17) and Schmidt (1892, 455).
56 Bovon 1984, 51-52,57.